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Younger workers' attitudes and perceptions towards older colleagues

1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to explore the attitudes of younger workers towards older colleagues within the workplace and to investigate whether they have ageist perceptions. Ageism can be defined as the “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against older people because they are old” (Butler, 1989). The World Health Organisation (WHO) adds “Ageism can take many forms, including prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory practices, or institutional policies and practices that perpetuate stereotypical beliefs” (WHO, 2015, p. 226). As there has been a rise in the proportion of older adults in the workforce due to population ageing (Department for Work and Pensions, 2017), it is becoming increasingly important for employees from different generations to be able to work together effectively. It is therefore necessary to consider the attitudes of younger employees towards older colleagues, as these can impact intergenerational working relationships. This has been shown in a study where a negative association was found between stereotype threat and a worker's attitudes towards their job, which affected their decision to retire (von Hippel et al, 2013). Thus, in order to create environments that are conducive to the well-being of employees of all ages, it is important to gain insight into the attitudes of younger workers towards their older colleagues and the basis of them.

In order to assess the attitudes of younger workers, there are three key research objectives; firstly, to investigate younger workers' views on intergenerational relationships within the workplace. This includes whether younger employees consider the work ethic of older colleagues to be complementary to their own. The second objective is to explore the attitudes of younger employees towards older co-workers. Finally, since the attitudes of employers could be fuelling the perceptions of younger workers, the third research objective is to examine whether and how employers influence the attitudes of younger workers towards older colleagues.

For this research, a younger worker has been defined as a worker aged 35 or below, as other studies have used a similar age boundary (Van Dalen et al, 2010), allowing comparison. Additionally, for the purposes of this research, an older worker is someone above the age of 50, as employment guidance for older workers from the Department for Work and Pensions is aimed at individuals aged 50 or above (Department for Work and Pensions, 2016).

2. Conceptual Framework

The two important theoretical ideas that have guided this research are the *socioemotional selectivity* theory and the *social identity* theory. The socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that younger individuals have contrasting priorities compared to older adults. Carstensen (1991) proposed this theory, and stated that younger adults tend to place more importance on gaining knowledge, and even if they are socialising, they do it with the aim of progressing their careers. On the other hand, according to this theory, older individuals place more value on emotional goals such as socialising (Carstensen, 1991), which may be due to a greater satisfaction achieved from these activities. This could also be because older adults are subconsciously aware that they have shorter periods of time to live, so they have fewer opportunities to pursue their emotional goals (Fung et al, 2001). As the socioemotional selectivity theory implies that younger individuals may have a greater drive for acquiring knowledge compared to older adults, this may lead to conflict and a poor intergenerational working relationship.

The *social identity* theory provides an explanation for younger workers' attitudes towards older colleagues. This theory proposes that members of a particular social group may perceive themselves

as superior to other groups in order to attain a more positive social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), for example, group members may have negative attitudes towards individuals who are not a part of their group, in order to increase their own status (Korte, 2007). This theory also implies that individuals may adapt their personality in order to conform to a group that they are a part of, such as groups formed due to age categories or gender, even if this contradicts their own opinions (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). An individual's existing beliefs may also be exaggerated or downplayed, in favour of the beliefs of the group, and this is known as depersonalisation (Korte, 2007).

Associating this theory with the research objectives, it may indicate that younger employees view themselves as superior to older colleagues and therefore have negative attitudes towards them. Additionally, this theory suggests that if a group of younger workers believe that older colleagues are unproductive, a younger individual that previously had differing perceptions towards older workers may be influenced by the opinions of the group. This may lead to conflict amongst the different generations.

3. Literature review

3.1 Empirical evidence

Firstly, there is minimal empirical evidence exploring younger workers' perceptions of intergenerational relationships within the workplace. An exception is a Canadian study which looked at the perceptions of different generations (Krywulak and Roberts, 2009). The existing literature focuses on the challenges of managing a multigenerational workforce due to generational differences in work ethics (Ali et al., 2009; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002; Wey Smola and Sutton, 2002).

Secondly, although many studies have explored the attitudes of co-workers towards older colleagues, they have not examined the attitudes of younger workers in particular. Of the few studies that have investigated the attitudes of younger employees, positive attitudes that were found included younger workers' belief that the experience of older colleagues is invaluable (Brooke and Taylor, 2005) and their disagreement with the statements that older co-workers are less productive and have a decreased physical capacity (McCann and Keaton, 2013). Negative attitudes were also prevalent, including younger workers' perception of older colleagues as more afraid of using technology (McCann and Keaton, 2013) and less adaptable to change (Brooke and Taylor, 2005; Loretto et al, 2000). However, most of these studies are quantitative, so there is no insight provided into why employees have certain perceptions of older workers, which is one of the key research objectives of this study. Additionally, there is minimal evidence from the United Kingdom, but this will be discussed in this paper. This is important, because there may be country-specific differences in the prevalence of ageist attitudes due to recent anti age-discrimination policies.

Finally, although studies have been conducted on the attitudes of employers towards older workers, what is less well known is whether employers' attitudes influence the perceptions of younger workers towards older colleagues. This is important to consider, since if employers have negative attitudes towards older workers, it may exacerbate ageist attitudes amongst younger individuals.

3.2 Anti-age discrimination policy in the United Kingdom

The Equality Act 2010 protects individuals from discrimination based on several different "protected characteristics", including age (*Equality Act, 2010*). This legislation may decrease ageism towards older workers, because prior to the prohibition of discrimination, the existence of practices that disadvantaged older individuals could have validated any negative attitudes that younger workers had towards them. Another important policy consideration is the Default Retirement Age, which was

introduced in 2006 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010), and abolished in 2011 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011). This previously allowed individuals above the age of 65 to be forced to retire without any valid reason, other than their age (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010). It could have therefore increased intergenerational tension in the workplace, as employees may have viewed workers above the age of 65 as less productive or more disposable, due to the existence of an age boundary at which mandatory retirement was lawful. The concern is that despite anti age-discriminatory laws, there is still evidence of ageism within the existing literature. Therefore, whether ageist attitudes are prevalent amongst younger individuals needs to be investigated, and if they are present, it is necessary to make efforts to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

4. Methodology

A qualitative design was adopted and individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. Ethical approval from King's College London Research Ethics Committee was obtained.

4.1 Sampling process

Convenience sampling was used to recruit a sample of ten younger workers; nine were female and one was male. The inclusion criteria included being aged 35 or younger and currently in employment at a multigenerational workplace in England. Eight churches with regular youth group meetings, within a two mile radius, were initially contacted, as that would enable the recruitment of individuals from a range of different workplaces. Additionally, a number of private sector workplaces such as medical practices and grocery chains within the same radius were also approached. At these sites, with the permission of either the pastor or the manager, a ten minute oral presentation was given, informing individuals of the purpose and aims of the study. Information sheets were also distributed, so that interested individuals could get in touch. Four individuals were recruited via this method, and snowball sampling was subsequently used to recruit the rest of the sample (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

4.2 Data collection

An interview topic guide consisting of 15 questions was developed and before interviewing the participants, a pilot interview was carried out. The participants signed consent forms before taking part in the interviews. Most of the participants were interviewed at their workplace, in a private room. Other participants were unable to be interviewed at work, so an alternative was agreed, such as meeting at a quiet café that was an appropriate distance away from their workplace in order to ensure confidentiality. A field work risk assessment form was submitted to King's College London and approved. The interviews were all audio recorded and fully transcribed verbatim, with the deletion of the audio recordings following transcription. Ten interviews were conducted, and their duration ranged from 37 minutes to 61 minutes (average; 44 minutes).

4.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used which involved identifying patterns that emerged from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first step of analysis was familiarisation with the data, by transcription and close reading. The initial codes were then generated by hand, by noting parts of the data that were of interest from the interview transcripts. Finally, the codes were organised into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and these are discussed in the next section.

5. Findings

Table 1: Participant characteristics.

Participant	Age range	Gender	Job sector
Worker A	20-30	Female	Educational
Worker B	31-35	Male	Healthcare
Worker C	31-35	Female	Church
Worker D	20-30	Female	Healthcare
Worker E	31-35	Female	Lettings
Worker F	20-30	Female	Administration
Worker G	31-35	Female	Healthcare
Worker H	20-30	Female	Healthcare
Worker I	20-30	Female	Retail
Worker J	31-35	Female	Administration

5.1 Intergenerational working dynamics

The key characteristics of the younger workers are summarised in Table 1. Most younger workers stated that they have an intrinsic level of respect for older colleagues. As a result, they are more formal whilst communicating with them compared to their interactions with younger co-workers. Participants also felt that they share a greater comfort level with younger workers due to similar interests, whereas the generational gap makes interacting with older individuals difficult:

You could be very close to your parents, but there will always be things that they see differently to you, their values will be slightly different to yours because they've been brought up in a different generation with different environmental situations. - Worker D

This decreased level of comfort with older workers may affect the work dynamic between different generations, as some younger workers find older colleagues intimidating and therefore hesitate to ask them questions for fear of being judged. Notably, these communication problems were more prevalent amongst workers of the age group 20-30. Younger employees above the age of 30 described more positive interactions with older co-workers.

Despite these communication issues, many younger workers considered it important to have a combination of both older and younger employees at a workplace, as their different characteristics and work ethics are complementary. However, participants also discussed instances of intergenerational tension, such as clashes due to differing approaches towards work. This conflict may be exacerbated by individuals forming groups, for example, younger workers tend to interact mainly with individuals of their own age group:

I think when they're in groups like that; they're more likely to get frustrated with one another. The older ones may get frustrated at the younger ones for maybe their customer service, because they're a bit younger and don't know how to deal with things like that. And the younger ones may get frustrated at the older ones for not being as speedy. They're more likely to talk to each other about it and make it worse. - Worker F

5.2 Positive perceptions of older workers

Most participants perceived older employees as helpful, experienced, knowledgeable, and willing to pass on their knowledge to younger workers. A recurrent finding was the perception of older colleagues as more hard working and focussed. It was thought that this was as a result of them growing up in a different era:

I think with younger workers, they're not that bothered about work because it's not the be all and end all. Older people have been brought up with the mindset that you have to work until a certain age; you need to provide and that's the bottom line. - Worker C

An additional positive finding was that although some younger workers were aware of stereotypes towards older employees, such as them taking longer to complete tasks, they highlighted that their older colleagues provide a better quality of work.

5.3 Negative perceptions of older workers

Negative perceptions of older workers included their difficulty with multitasking whereas younger workers were described as more creative, with a greater ability to think out of the box compared to their older counterparts. Furthermore, all the individuals interviewed believed that older workers are resistant to change:

When I am trying to implement something innovative; older workers don't adapt as fast onto this new idea . . . You start prepping them slowly so it's not such a shock that they have to readjust their whole schedule, which is too much for them to handle. - Worker E

Similar to older workers being resistant to change, another common theme was that they are unwilling to consider suggestions from younger colleagues; they think that they know best as a result of being in the job for a longer period of time. Additionally, younger employees felt that due to the responsibilities that their older co-workers have, such as having kids, they do not prioritise work, and have a decreased drive to push themselves:

The negativity really gets to you, it is infectious . . . When the young workers come in, they see this attitude of 'it's my break now, I'm going.' And it's just like a disease. Older workers just aren't happy, it may be their personal lives, but they bring that unhappiness with them to work and it filters down. - Worker B

5.4 Basis of younger workers' attitudes

Many younger individuals formed their opinions of older workers from their own experiences. Some participants held stereotypical attitudes towards older workers prior to working with them, but these perceptions subsequently changed. A key factor that positively impacted the attitudes of younger workers towards their older colleagues was their upbringing, as the majority of them were brought up with the mindset that they should respect older individuals. Furthermore, younger workers' perceptions of older family members affected their attitudes towards older workers:

Because I've been quite close with my grandmothers, I think that influences the way I treat older people, because I think oh you're the same age as my grandmother. - Worker G

Another key factor was the media, and although some younger individuals did not believe that it affected their perceptions of older workers, others thought that it negatively influenced their

attitudes. This is due to the portrayal of older workers as weak or frail; it is rare to see healthy and productive older employees on television.

5.5 Perceptions of the productivity of older employees

Interestingly, individuals with the most interactions with older workers were found to have more positive attitudes towards them.

Technology

The perception of older workers being slower at using technology was the most prevalent theme in the interviews. Participants stated that as older employees are used to different ways of working, it is difficult for them to adapt to new technologies. Indeed, many thought that older workers are frightened by technology. All the younger workers also indicated that their older counterparts need more of an explanation on how to use technologies:

Their brain isn't programmed to pick it up very quickly; we've been brought up around apps and things like that, but they never had those things. It's difficult to bring them around to newer ways of working. They need to analyse different technologies in a sense. They need to understand it. - Worker H

Social skills

Most individuals considered the social skills of a worker to be dependent upon their personality rather than their age, but from their experience, older workers had good social skills. Some participants felt that younger workers can be more detached and less compassionate compared to older colleagues, and one worker describes this:

They've definitely got a softer way of dealing with people, whereas the younger crowd have a more instant approach. That can be better in some aspects because they actually take the time to listen. You have to slow down a younger worker slightly. But I think that's experience with the older crowd, they've dealt with many personalities and they know how to deal with people. - Worker E

Experience and knowledge

The general perception amongst participants was that their older colleagues have a wealth of experience that is invaluable and helps them with decision making, whereas younger workers tend to ask for more guidance. In contrast, some younger workers believed that the experience of older employees cannot compensate for their decreased adaptability:

I can understand why someone would employ a person who is more experienced, but if I was employing someone, I wouldn't employ someone too old - this is the bad thing of thinking of work in terms of business . . . a younger worker, if they have two or three years of experience, I would be happy to take them because I can carve them into what I want to carve them into. An older person is set in their ways; it's so difficult to change them. - Worker B

It was also thought that older workers believe that they have accumulated sufficient knowledge; therefore, they do not make the effort to learn new things. On the other hand, younger workers have the drive to progress and are constantly updating their knowledge.

Reliability

The consensus amongst younger workers was that older colleagues are a lot more reliable, and they stated that managers give specific shifts to older workers, such as early morning ones, as they trust them to turn up. Participants suggested that this was because older employees have grown up in a different generation, where more importance was given to work:

I would say the older person is a lot more reliable because it's part of the way they've been brought up, they've got it drummed in their head that even if you're ill, you just get on with it and set it aside. I think with younger people, we live in a society where we make a big deal out of being sick and make a mountain out of a molehill. -Worker H

However, some younger workers did acknowledge that their older counterparts may take more time off due to health problems, but despite this, they still thought that older workers are more reliable.

Physical and mental capacity

The majority of younger workers did not believe that older colleagues have a decreased work performance due to a lower physical or mental capacity. However, some of them discussed the tendency of older workers to work fewer hours, and that they may not be able to complete the same number of tasks as younger employees. One participant explained that older workers are unwilling to work despite having the capacity for it:

I think they do have the same capacity as younger workers, but they wouldn't want to do it. Because of their experience, they could work so much more quickly, but they just don't want to. I don't know what it is. They're tired or jaded and that's why it's so frustrating, because it means younger workers have to do more work to make up for it. - Worker B

5.6 The influence of employers' attitudes on younger employees

There were two opposing opinions on whether the attitudes of employers influence the perceptions of participants towards older employees, with an equal divide. Workers predominantly above the age of 30 stated that employers' attitudes do not influence their own perceptions; they form their opinions from their own experiences:

I don't think what my employer thinks would affect how I feel towards older workers, because it's all about getting to know a person, once you know a person, you won't be influenced by other people's attitudes towards them, because you will have formed your own. - Worker J

The other half were mainly of the age group 20-30, and they expressed the view that it is easy to be influenced by the attitudes of others, particularly if it is your employer:

Attitudes are contagious. This is how bullying happens; everyone wants to be a part of something, so if employers hate older workers, to fit in you would adopt that attitude. You might not agree with it, but you would adopt it . . . if people you respect are telling you that these people are useless, your perceptions will change. - Worker H

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1 Main findings

A key finding from this study that has not been explored in other studies is younger workers' decreased comfort level with older colleagues due to the generational gap. Despite this, some younger workers considered it important to have employees of different ages within the workplace, due to complementary characteristics, which was also found from a quantitative study conducted in the United Kingdom (Loretto et al, 2000). Additionally, participants discussed the perceived intergenerational conflict due to differing work ethics. This conflict is exacerbated when individuals form groups on the basis of age, which is consistent with the social identity theory.

In relation to the positive attitudes of younger employees towards older co-workers, the findings from this study are similar to those from a study carried out in Australia and the United Kingdom (Brooke and Taylor, 2005), in that participants stated that they value the experience of older workers. Additionally, this study demonstrates that older workers are perceived as more welcoming and are thought to produce work of a higher quality than younger workers, which was not explored in depth in previous studies. This study has also found that the greater the age of employees, the more positive their attitudes are towards older colleagues; younger employees aged 20-30 perceived a large generational gap with older co-workers, whereas younger workers above the age of 30 did not have the same opinion. This may be because employees aged 20-30 are more easily influenced by stereotypical beliefs of older workers, due to less experience working with them. On the other hand, workers above the age of 30 may be able to form opinions based on their own experiences, as it is more likely that they have been working for a greater period of time. This is supported by findings from this study that show an association between increased interactions with older workers and more positive attitudes towards them.

Negative perceptions of older workers that emerged from this study are similar to those from previous quantitative studies (Brooke and Taylor, 2005; Loretto et al, 2000), such as their resistance to change. This study expanded upon the current literature by providing an in-depth insight into the beliefs of younger workers, including the importance they place on easing older colleagues into change. This study also elicited stereotypical attitudes of younger workers towards their older counterparts, for example, their lack of interest in acquiring new knowledge. Additionally, this research examines the reasons behind these attitudes, such as the perception of older employees as less ambitious due to them having increased responsibilities in their personal lives. This is consistent with the socioemotional selectivity theory, suggesting that younger workers believe that their older colleagues give increased importance to emotional goals rather than prioritising work. Finally, this study shows that most younger employees formed their opinions of older co-workers through their interactions with them, but the media and contact with older family members were also influential.

With regards to productivity, this research has found that older workers excel at different aspects of productivity compared to younger workers. Perceptions of older employees as less competent at using technology and more reliable than younger co-workers have also been shown in previous studies (Kim and Mo, 2014; Steinberg et al., 1996). This study builds upon the findings from other studies, as it explores the basis of younger workers' attitudes. For example, older workers are thought to be more reliable as a result of growing up in a different generation. Furthermore, in this study, participants did not notice any differences in physical or mental capacity between younger and older workers. This was also found in a study from the United States and Thailand (McCann and Keaton, 2013), but contrasts with findings from the United Kingdom, where there was a perceived reduction in physical capacity to work with age (Loretto et al, 2000). This was greater for individuals in manual labour, and as all the participants from this study are in non-manual jobs, this may explain the contradictory results.

This study adds to the literature by showing that for workers of the age group 20-30, employers' attitudes are influential. Whilst many participants stated that the attitudes of employers influence their own perceptions of older colleagues; other younger employees believed that the attitudes of their co-workers were more important. This was thought to be due to group formation amongst employees, causing them to validate each other's negative perceptions. Therefore, these findings also provide support for the social identity theory.

6.2 Strengths and limitations of the study

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to investigate younger workers' perceptions of their older colleagues. The findings, however, must be considered in light of the following limitations. The sample was recruited from a small geographic area in London and it is unknown whether similar views would have been elicited in other parts of the country. A more balanced sample in terms of gender would have been useful in exploring whether gender affects the attitudes of younger workers towards their older colleagues. Lastly, the participants were self selected and therefore may have different attitudes compared to other members of the study population.

6.3 Implications for practice

This study has found that greater contact with older workers leads to more positive attitudes towards them and that stereotypical attitudes can spread more quickly if workers are solely interacting with members of their own groups. Therefore, organisations should try to increase interactions between workers of different ages, and minimise group formation in order to decrease ageist attitudes, improve intergenerational working relationships and enhance the well-being of employees of different ages. One method of decreasing intergenerational tension is by having regular team building sessions that could provide an opportunity for individuals to: interact with people of all ages, try to understand generational differences and ask each other any questions they have (Hatfield, 2002). These sessions can help to educate employees on generational diversity and promote intergenerational solidarity. It would also be beneficial for younger workers to learn from their older colleagues' approach towards work and vice versa. This could be achieved by mentoring; a younger worker could be paired with an older colleague to improve intergenerational working relationships by facilitating the transmission of skills and knowledge across generations (Jenkins, 2008).

6.4 Implications for future research

As many younger workers stated that the media played a key role in shaping their perceptions of their older counterparts, it would be beneficial to carry out research into which forms of media are the most influential, and how they have affected the perceptions of younger workers. It has also been suggested that if older workers believe that their younger colleagues have ageist attitudes towards them, they will avoid communicating with them (Finkelstein et al, 2013). Thus, it would be helpful to conduct research into whether ageism is perceived amongst older workers. Finally, although this study has not found any differences in the attitudes of younger workers from different job sectors towards older co-workers, a larger study with participants from a range of different work backgrounds may produce varying results, so further research should be carried out on this.

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